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Inside the Confederate Nation: Essays in Honor of Emory M. Thomas

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Review

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Confederate Nationalism

Historians Honor a Colleague

Recipients of a *festschrift* or honorary collection of essays are a rare breed. They are not simply an acknowledgment of scholarly accomplishments but recognition of exceptional teachers who impart their own understanding of the past without limiting the imaginations of their students. Such is clearly the case in regard to this present volume titled **Inside the Confederate Nation: Essays in Honor of Emory M. Thomas**, edited by Leslie J. Gordon and John C. Inscoe. The contributors are former graduate students, professional colleagues, and notable historians and their essays reflect a wide-range of the application of Thomas's core ideas that are contained in his seminal studies, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (University of South Carolina Press, ISBN 0872497801, $12.95 paperback) and *The Confederate Nation* (Harper Perennial, ISBN 0061319651, $17.95, softcover). While the essays reflect both agreement and disagreement with elements of Thomas's ideas, collectively they are rooted in the rich interpretive landscape of Thomas's Confederacy. While all the essays are worth a close reading, time permits only a brief overview.

At the heart of Thomas's scholarship is the idea of conflict and change within the Confederate experience. While the goals of the Confederate government were to preserve the South's antebellum racial and political status quo, the experiences and uncertainties of war forced white Southerners to question and challenge received ideas surrounding gender and familial relationships as they negotiated and weighed the relative significance of state, regional, and national identity. It was the presence of women in the hospitals and factories along with the late approval of limited emancipation that reflects the

extent to which white Southerners were willing to sacrifice for the purposes of Confederate independence and the maintenance of their national identity. This question of Confederate nationalism has attracted the attention of a number of historians over the past few decades. Unfortunately, the debate has all too often been framed around the question of whether Southerners created a collective national identity or whether their failure to do so constituted the backdrop for an inevitable failure. Problems abound for this debate, including the relatively dry question of how to conceptually analyze nationalism and what constitutes sufficient nationalism.

Fortunately, the eight essays that constitute the first and largest section of this volume on nationalism concentrate on the empirical question of how Southerners identified with the Confederate nation. Brian Wills examines the morale and nationalistic sentiments of the residents of Suffolk and southeastern Virginia. Even during periods of Union occupation, according to Wills, residents of the area remained defiant in their refusal to take loyalty oaths and in their disruptions of an attempt to hold elections for the U.S. Congress in late 1862. Keith Bohannon explores the reenlistment option that was open to soldiers in the Army of Tennessee in early 1864. According to Bohannon, some soldiers saw reenlistment as not only a reaffirmation of their loyalty to the Confederacy but also a public statement to southern civilians and the enemy. While Emory Thomas's dissertation and first book focused on the transformation of Richmond during the war, David McGee applies his distinction between internal and external revolutions to the wartime transformation of Raleigh, North Carolina. The internal revolution that followed the secession of the state included a massive shift in the economy, government interference with private property, slaveowners discussing the possibility of slavery ending, public participation of women in political affairs, and increased involvement of the state and local governments in everyday life. The shifting of focus from the national to local perspectives highlights the complexity and constantly shifting identifications that waxed and waned in response to such conditions as the demands from Richmond and the presence of Union armies. Taken together the essays tell us muchùin the words of historian Gary Gallagherùas to how the Confederacy managed to survive four years of bloody conflict.

Four essays examine the transformation of the family and gender relations during the war. Lesley Gordon explores how nationalism permeated the relationship of an elite young Thomas County, Georgia couple. Through a close reading of over a hundred letters between Bobbie Mitchell, who served in the

army, and Nellie Foundren, Gordon concludes that a strong identification with the Confederacy fueled their relationship, which in turn encouraged their continued support of the Confederate nation. Jennifer Gross traces the increased attention on the part of the legislatures of the states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia to the growing welfare needs of widows and the children of those who had died while serving in the Confederate army. While the demands were initially directed and debated by state governments, by 1864 the Confederate Congress had moved in to take responsibility. Gross contends that this shift in responsibility reflected southerners beliefs that the national government should be responsible for their welfare and their suffering. The wartime experiences of those families who suffered the loss of a father or husband shaped the postwar debate concerning the amount and kind of public assistance that was due those who suffered the most on the home front.

Arguably, the war brought about the sharpest disagreements and discussions over the issue of race. The Confederacy was established to protect its peculiar institution, however, the changing face of war moved the fault lines closer to positions that few could have imagined just a few short years before. The question of arming slaves and limited emancipation was one such debate. Philip Dillard investigates the debates in both Lynchburg, Virginia and Galveston, Texas; the former community expressed support, while the latter resisted. He concludes that the difference lay in the proximity of Union armies and their identification with the war effort. Residents of Lynchburg were directly threatened through much of the war by Union armies and were more closely connected to Virginia's bloody battlefields. The level of approval of plans to arm slaves, according to Dillard, show that weary men and women who had seen destruction all about them were willing to make any and all sacrifices that might lead to victory.

The question of how someone like Charles Francis Adams along with the rest of the North came to perceive Robert E. Lee as a symbol of both reconciliation and reunion is explored by Nina Silber. Although Lee's biography included traits that went beyond the typical elements of white southern manhood, according to Silber, by the turn of the century he had come to be seen as the embodiment of the Victorian concepts of manhood and manly virtue. Adams's 1907 speech at Washington and Lee University in which he praised Lee as the embodiment of gentlemanliness served to help construct the marble man image that historians, including Emory Thomas, have worked to correct in recent years.

This is an exceptionally strong collection of essays. They succeed in honoring the scholarship of Emory Thomas by exploring his own ideas even as the contributors apply those ideas to new and fruitful avenues of research.

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